

Fragment of the Month: October 2017

## **Early Karaite Halakha according to Karaite Commentaries to the Bible (T-S 16.316)**

Yoram Erder

In summer 2017 I was a visiting scholar in the Genizah Research Unit in Cambridge.

Most of my time I devoted to the study of documents which contain early Karaite commentaries to the Bible and the polemic of Sa'adia Gaon against the Karaites.

We owe a huge debt to distinguished scholars like Schechter, Hirschfeld, Ginzberg and Mann, who published a significant portion of those documents, but nevertheless a renewed study of them is required.

The Genizah documents are essentially fragmentary. In order to understand the Karaite halakha in these documents in its broad context, one needs to read the extensive corpus of early Karaite commentaries, which are mostly found in manuscripts in western libraries and in the Firkowicz Collection in Russia. These commentaries are written in Judaeo-Arabic and most of them were not in the hands of the first scholars. Not only that, but the first scholars did not trouble themselves to compare their Genizah documents with the early Karaite commentaries available in their time, and instead they made do by reading late Karaite commentaries to the Bible written in Hebrew in the later Middle Ages, since these were readily available in print. The Karaites that wrote these later books did not, in their writings, present the halakhic controversies of their predecessors.

The first scholars studied the early Karaite halakha in the light of poor remnants of sectarian halakha they found in the Talmudic literature. From 1910 they had at their disposal the Damascus Covenant scroll that was discovered in the

Genizah. When and where it was written was still then in debate. Nowadays, of course, we can examine early Karaite halakha in the light of the entire corpus of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

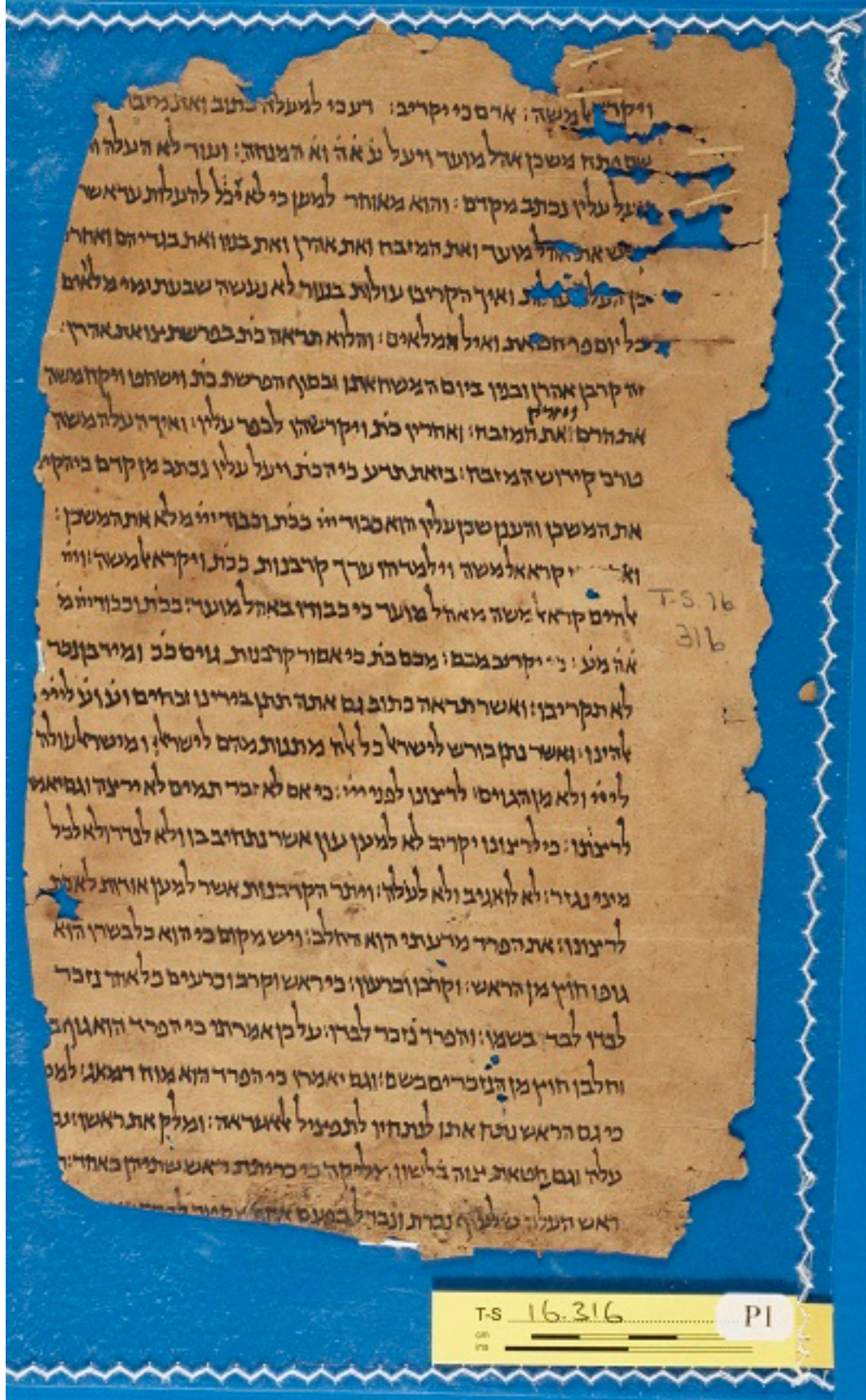
Below I shall refer briefly to three issues discussed by Daniel al-Qūmisī, one of the first Karaites, in his interpretation of the story of the erection of the Tabernacle that took place in the second year of the Israelites wandering in the desert on the 1st of Nisan (Exodus 40:2, 17). Al-Qūmisī's view will be examined according to the information gathered from the Genizah documents and the polemic directed against him by the Karaite sages Yefet ben 'Eli and Ya'qūb al-Qirqisānī in their commentaries to the Pentateuch.

There is ample evidence that the story of the erection of the Tabernacle was a source for halakhic debates between the sects during the Second Temple period. First and foremost is the first date mentioned in *Megillat Ta'anit*: 'From the first day of Nisan until the eighth thereof the daily burnt offering (עולת התמיד) was established'.

The viewpoints of al-Qūmisī discussed here are:

- A. **The beginning of the regular worship in the Tabernacle:** According to *Megillat Ta'anit* the first daily burnt offering was sacrificed on the 1st of Nisan. It means that regular worship began on the first day of the erection of the Tabernacle. Yefet ben 'Eli and al-Qirqisānī followed this notion.

In a commentary by al-Qūmisī to Leviticus 1:1–2, preserved in the Genizah and published by Schechter (T-S 16.316, Schechter 1902: 512–514; 1903: 144–146), we learn that al-Qūmisī maintained that during the first seven days of the Tabernacle, which are called the seven days of consecration (ימי המילואים), only the consecration offerings (קרבנות המילואים) were offered. The Temple Scroll found in Qumran agrees with al-Qūmisī's assertion.



Daniel al-Qumisi's commentary on the book of Leviticus, T-S 16.316, originally published by Schechter in his *Saadyana*.

- B. **The calendar:** The 1st of Nisan is the first day of the year in the biblical calendar. According to the Talmudic sages when the Tabernacle was erected the 1st of Nisan fell on a Sunday. In Sa'adia Gaon's polemic against the Karaite Ibn Sāqweih, preserved in the Genizah and published by Hirschfeld (T-S 8Ka.10.6, Hirschfeld 1905: 116–117), we learn that the opponent of the Gaon asserted that the Tabernacle was erected on Friday. It turns out that this was the prevailing view among the Karaites.

The Karaite Sahl ben Maṣḥiah firmly rejected the notion that the Tabernacle was erected on Friday. If this was the case, we would have to conclude that the Israelites had conducted their journeys on Saturdays. The

Talmudic Sages thought that this was the case. Reading the Book of Jubilees, which had adopted the solar calendar, one comes to the conclusion that the author of this book, like Sahl, also denied the possibility that the journeys in the desert took place on Saturdays.

It seems that al-Qūmisī was one of the Karaites who claimed that Wednesday was the day the Tabernacle was erected. According to the solar calendar of Qumran, the 1st of Nisan is the first day of the year and it falls always on Wednesday – the day the luminaries were created (Genesis 1:14).

C. **Commandments pertaining to the Land of Israel:** The consecration of the Tabernacle also included sacrifices by the Patriarchs of the Twelve Tribes of Israel over 12 days (Numbers 7). Yefet and al-Qirqisānī asserted, like the Talmudic sages, that the first Patriarch had sacrificed on the 1st of Nisan. According to this view, the last sacrifice had been offered before the 14th of Nisan. On that day the Israelites had celebrated the 'Passover of the Wilderness' (Numbers 9), which included the seven days of unleavened bread, despite the fact that they are not mentioned.

As could be guessed from the Genizah document published by Schechter and from the explicit words of al-Qirqisānī, al-Qūmisī asserted that the first Patriarch had offered his sacrifice on the 8th of Nisan. Therefore some of the Patriarchs had made their offerings during the seven days of unleavened bread, which were not celebrated in the desert.

Radical circles within the Karaite movement deduced from the fact that the seven days of unleavened bread were not celebrated in the desert that the holiday commandments are commandments pertaining to the Land of Israel only, therefore they should not be celebrated when the people of Israel are in exile. It seems that this halakha originated in sectarian circles during the Second Temple period.

From this brief discussion it emerges that al-Qūmisī was in many issues close to the sectarian halakha of antiquity. His Karaite successors Yefet ben 'Eli and Ya'qūb al-Qirqisānī distanced themselves from his assertions in many cases. This conclusion should be added to previous studies demonstrating al-Qūmisī's heavy reliance on the theology of the Qumran sect's writings.

---

## Bibliography

H. Hirschfeld 1905, 'The Arabic portion of the Cairo Genizah at Cambridge (Eleventh Article)', *Jewish Quarterly Review* 18, 113–120.

S. Schechter 1902, 'Saadyana: Third Article', *Jewish Quarterly Review* 14, 449–516. (Repeated in *Saadyana* (Cambridge, 1903), esp. pp. 144–146)

---

If you enjoyed this Fragment of the Month, you can find others here.

*Contact us: [genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk](mailto:genizah@lib.cam.ac.uk)*

The zoomable images are produced using Cloud Zoom, a jQueryimage zoom plugin:

Cloud Zoom, Copyright (c) 2010, R Cecco, [www.professorcloud.com](http://www.professorcloud.com)

Licensed under the MIT License